

THE INEFFABLE SOMETHINGNESS OF LOVE AND REVOLUTION*

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When I reread *Confessions of the Fox* at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in London, all the references to plague leapt out at me. In eighteenth-century London, which provides the setting for one of the book's multiple registers, plague is less an event than a background condition structuring relations between the state and its subjects. In a typical scene, "the poorer parishes were lock'd down ... the street teem'd with centinels. Several at every corner, shouting at coves to take to their quarters. They had scarves tied 'round their mouths and noses—their shouts muffled by rough Linen". Plague ships anchor in the Thames. Advised by the Royal Society of Physicians, the Minister of Public Health issues confinement orders whose violation risks incarceration in the notorious Bedlam asylum. Jack Sheppard might be the "greatest gaolbreaker and the most devoted, most thorough carouser of quim in all of London", but like you and me, he is paranoid about catching the plague ("What if the customs-house manager had plague and then touched some fustian and then Jack touched it and then—? *And then and then*"). Bess Khan, whose quim (pussy) he most wants, mutters darkly about the "securitizational furor" that the plague has elicited. She would know. Part Anglo, part lascar, it is bodies like hers that most attract the attention of the centinels, who are especially on the lookout for lascars and levantines suspected of having brought the plague to London on ships from the East Indies.

Against this grim backdrop of surveillance and cruelty, something magical blooms between Jack and Bess, fuelled as much by what they find in each other as by their inhabitation of an undercommons that is called forth by the relentless enclosures of their time and place. This is the domain of the urban poor and the unruly mob, the gender ambiguous and the wayward, the black and brown detritus of empire that washes up the Thames into the city that is fast becoming the centre of the world. Their great nemesis is Jonathan Wild, Thief-Catcher-in-General, whose profiteering protection racket organises both crime and its punishment. Life here is nasty, brutish and short, but what Hobbes didn't tell you and what Jack and Bess would have you

* *Editors' Note:* This is the third review in the book review symposium on *Confessions of the Fox*. It is preceded by Oishik Sircar and Shals Mahajan's reviews and is followed by the author Jordy Rosenberg's response.

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know is that “revelry is the verso face of misery and Terror”. Theirs is an exceptional time, marked by the birth of something that would later be called capitalism, by the emergence of the property form (hello, John Locke) and by a certain conception of the body. But more on that anon.

Two voices in the book alert the reader to what is at stake in the daring escapades of Jack, Bess and the bats, mollies and assorted figures with whom they cavort.¹ The first is Bess herself, who in Jack’s telling has a knack for “conducting study at the crosshairs of violence—spinning speculation from wreckage”. I’m suspicious of characters who seem to know that they are living through epochal shifts in real-time, suspicious that their analysis might be a retrospective projection onto events repackaged to look as if their meaning was glaringly evident at the time. But Bess’s theorizing comes out of personal experience of devastation and loss. Having watched her parents die in the valiant and doomed struggle of the Fen-Tigers to prevent surveyors from draining the fens (marshlands) of eastern England to create arable land, Bess has seen up close the violence of enclosure and its terrible toll on ordinary people.

The other theoretical voice in the book, the voice that brings Bess and Jack’s story to us in the present, is that of Dr R Voth, frustrated academic in the neoliberal university (what other kind is there?). When in one of its characteristic gestures of contempt for the humanities, the university decides to empty the upper floors of its library to make space for swish offices for administrators, Voth chances upon the lost memoirs of the legendary Jack Sheppard. In a significant departure from the then known archive of Sheppardiana, this particular text seems to suggest that Jack was assigned female at birth. This remarkable insinuation sets Voth, himself a trans person, on a frenzied project of annotation that, he thinks, might culminate in the production of a text to rival in importance the memoirs of Herculine Barbin in the annals of transgender history. What begins as a labour of love, even survival, is quickly co-opted by the ever-watchful university in the person of Dean of Surveillance Andrews. Hauled up for “improperly utilized” leisure hours, Voth is presented with a “choice” between being placed on unpaid leave and producing a text that will be marketed as “the earliest authentic confessional transgender memoirs known to history”.² The text is to be

¹ Readers concerned that their lack of proficiency in eighteenth-century cant might inhibit their appreciation of the text should relax: there are footnotes! Gorgeous, erudite, snarky footnotes.

² Voth exacts his revenge by inserting a copious account of the conditions of production of the annotated manuscript into its glorious footnotes. In that vein, reader, I must offer some confessions of my own. I wrote this review in a state of rage and frustration, broken only by the unmitigated joy that reading *Confessions* brought me. To cut a short story even shorter, the British university system is fucked. As the state has passed the burden of funding higher education onto students (now refashioned as consumers), universities have become ever more reliant on tuition fees and especially international student fees. The consequences of the marketization of universities have been intensified by the coronavirus, as a result of which it is widely expected that students, both domestic and international, are unlikely to enrol in their desired numbers, bringing many institutions to the brink of ruin. We are now ruled by accountants and their spread sheets, whose sole metric for the evaluation

published by a company called P-Quad, with which the university has recently “partnered”, that also has interests in pharmaceuticals. P-Quad and the university want to release the text in conjunction with the launch of a new pharmaceutical product: an “organic, humane, bioidentical open-source testosterone” produced from the urine of cows owned by the university. It turns out that testosterone or something like it is quite central to both Voth’s quandary and Jack’s confessions. But I’ll get to that in a bit.

One of the great joys of watching the *something* that develops between Jack and Bess is in observing how each sharpens the dissident sensibilities of the other (this is, incidentally, how a heartbroken Voth describes his relationship with his ex). Bess coaxes, even taunts, Jack out of his deference to the law (“Do you make all your decisions based on the threat of Punishment?”). Jack has an almost magical ability to hear the stories that commodities want to tell. They call out to him, “bawling out their miserable Biographies, their wants, their needs, their Histories and Travels ... the entire crowded consecutions of labor, Exchange, and Fraud congealed in them”. A Marxist before Marx, Jack aurally pierces the veil of commodity fetishism. We encounter several of the commodities that one might expect to find in imperial London—muslin, indigo, coffee, tea, sugar. But the commodity that is most pivotal to the narrative is a mysterious elixir. Originally concocted by a society of maroons in the Java Sea, the elixir was produced from pig urine through a complex and elaborate process that relied on the collective knowledge of a community now all but destroyed. What is remembered is the delightfully emboldening and bulking effect it had on all who consumed it.

When news of the magical elixir reaches London, everyone can see its enormous potential but has a different reaction to it. Jack wants the elixir, thinking that it might allow him to finally be the cove he knows himself to be. Hearing of Jack’s interest and thinking that he could use this to finally ensnare his most elusive opponent, Wild lays an elaborate trap while also devising a grisly scheme to extract the elixir from the gonads of convicted prisoners. Aware that Wild could use his immense profits from the elixir to finance his policing operation in perpetuity, Bess thinks—to Jack’s horror—that the only thing to do is to destroy the elixir. This disagreement between Bess and Jack, their most serious in all of the confessions, is almost a metaphor for the great debate in virtually all revolutionary and decolonisation movements: do we want what they have, or do we explode the structure of desire that has us wanting what they want and have? Both/and?

of our work is the potential revenue it might bring in. *I am a queer Londoner living through a plague while being fucked over by a neoliberal university.*

Jordy Rosenberg³ has asked a version of this question—or really three questions—in relation to testosterone.⁴ First, what dispossessions have turned the natural resource of testosterone into an exchangeable commodity? Rosenberg takes us through the sordid contortions of early modern English penal discourse that justified the use of incarcerated bodies as raw materials for the production of scientific knowledge and the use of labour to transform territory into raw material, ultimately making possible twentieth century testicular experimentation on the incarcerated in the search for virilising remedies (not a million miles away from Wild’s gruesome venture). I am reminded that the violence of this dispossession is ongoing by lines from a poem by Janani Balasubramaniam: “My testosterone is made by Israel’s largest company. There is colonization running through my bloodstream”.⁵ Second, noting that testosterone has a tendency to be seen as hypercapacitating the body, Rosenberg asks what guarantee there is that it will always capacitate in ways that contribute to a radical project. Answer, none: molecules in themselves do not do political things. And so, third, Rosenberg locates gendered embodiment in something beyond molecules and, really, beyond the self:

Remember before the T, and all of it, women who saw you a certain way? How (gendered) embodiment was something you made together? Remember how secret it felt? Can’t you take that secret you used to have and let it seed other things? You’re really going to have to. Because testosterone wants you to be a War Boy. It wants you to hoard resources and forget where they came from.

This is not an argument for or against taking T (indeed this way of framing the question might be beside the point), but a reminder that the history of the body is not reducible to what is injected into it.

Certainly, this is Jack’s experience. Jack is most fully himself, not so much because of the elixir or even his top surgery, but when Bess’s quim “pulses hot in the cradle of his mouth”, awakening his *something* into life. He is quite literally interpellated by Bess’s desire for him as Jack. And yet, this is far from simply the story of two individuals wrapped up in each other. For their desire is also shaped by the historical moment and movements that they inhabit. Somewhere towards the end of his annotating efforts, Voth reaches an astonishing conclusion. Having invested much

³ It boggles my mind that I have managed to write a review of this novel (is it a novel?) without naming its author till this late stage. To some extent, this is Rosenberg’s doing. By having Jack’s confessions brought to us by Voth, Rosenberg cleverly displaces himself from the narrative, even if inviting that inevitable and always annoying question about autobiography. Rather than asking that annoying question, I want to consider here the intertextuality between Rosenberg writing as himself and as Voth.

⁴ Jordy Rosenberg, ‘Trans/War Boy/Gender: The Primitive Accumulation of T’ (*Salvage*, 21 December 2015) <<https://salvage.zone/in-print/trans-war-boy-gender/>>.

⁵ Janani Balasubramaniam, ‘Trans/national’ (2013) <<https://totallytaba.tumblr.com/post/56324814807/the-male-persuasian-transnational-janani>>.

labour in demonstrating the authenticity of the Sheppard memoir and been confounded by some of the anachronistic references that populate the text, he wonders if the confessions are an act of plitho-hypomnesia or collective diary-keeping by a multitude that have, in addition, been supplemented by the guerrilla decolonial reading and writing practices of successive generations of radical students.

Anachronism is not only what betrays the truth, such as it is, of the memoir to Voth; it is also something Rosenberg plays with. I can't think of a contemporary writer in English, with the possible exception of Hilary Mantel, who has had early modern characters speak with such fidelity to the argot of their time while also sounding like they were chatting online (When Bess first invites Jack to stay with her, his internal monologue goes into hyperventilating overdrive: "She meant *her rooms*—her rooms with her in them—*Oh God*"; I think I might have read that as OMG or even OMFG). What time are these characters speaking in? Why do they sound so much like us? Or maybe the question is why are we so hungry for them to sound like us?